WHAT U CAN DO

SHADRACH WOODS

Architecture at Rice 27

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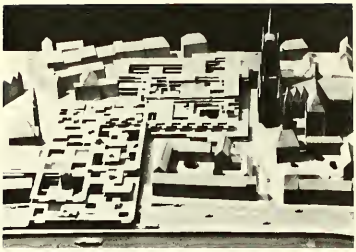
This is intended to be an elucidation of what I believe are the purposes of urbanism, and architecture, today. I shall be concerned not only with what I think is happening in cities of the west but also with what I think could and should be programmed in them for the immediate future. I shall be concerned with what I think urbanism is, which means defining its characteristic scope and purpose: What U Can Do, in other words.

Urbanism is a French word, and although my partially Anglo-Saxon heredity rebels at borrowing words from such Latinate sources, I have not yet found a good English or American equivalent. The English have a discipline called town-planning, which is something like urbanism; The Americans have city-planning which is nothing like it. In some places, 'Urban Design' is used to render the approximate meaning of the content of 'urbanism.'

The essence of urbanism, on the most mundane, practical level, is organization. This is also the essence of architecture. The relationship between architecture and urbanism is that they are parts of the same entity, which might be called environmental design, and that each is a part of the other.

"Urbanism and architecture are parts of a continuous process. Planning (urbanism) is the correlating of human activities; architecture is the housing of these activities . . . Urbanism establishes the milieu in which

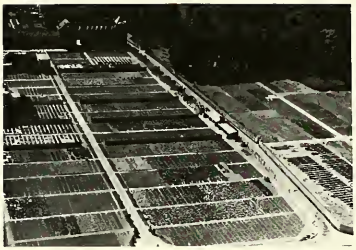


architecture happens . . . It remains abstract until it generates architecture." This quote is from the "Carré Bleu," Nov. 3, 1961, and is one which I would not change very much were I writing it today. It went on to describe the junction of urbanism as exploring and explaining the relationships among human activities. Naturally this remains rather vague. It may help if we try to pin down some of the uses of organization in architecture and urbanism.

All analogies are false, to begin with, and

thus forewarned we might consider the analogy of agriculture. We organize nature to support the growth of food, clothing, building materials, fuel, tobacco, hemp and so forth, and as the field and forest are organized through plowing, cutting, irrigation and drainage systems, so is the city formed around systems of public and private spaces, communications, supply, and elimination.

The built world thus is organized to support the growth of society, as the natural world is

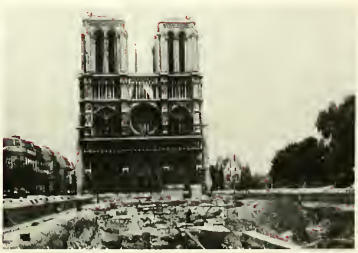


organized to supply agricultural produce. And, extending our false analogy, as the farmer works with nature, so must the citizens learn to control the beneficent and malignant forces in the urban context so that, through urban husbandry, they may create a place and a climate in which their society will thrive.

Urbanism, the organization of the urban context, is first of all concerned with the sweet workings of the various systems which are needed to support life in the city, bringing

the vital goods, fluids, and energies to all parts, and carrying away the wastes. At one level of consideration at least urbanism is underground, in subways and pipes and conduit.

Since we consider that life in the city is worth living, we are most immediately concerned with the establishment of a milieu in which life can flourish. The question of whether or not it is worth it is, I believe, rhetorical, since life for a vast number is lived in the city. In our western civilization, (the



very word comes from civis: citizen), the built world is the natural habitat of man. This milieu is organized according to systems of conduct (law) and systems of exchange of goods and services and of supply and elimination (economy). But first, before any of these, there are the intangible, imponderable, inexpressible human relationships which establish themselves among the citizens. These form a kind of unwritten code which men apparently need in order to live together. Tenuous though they may be, they are yet of the greatest

importance: the essential prerequisite of urban life. When these relationships are no longer vital, or viable, or clearly understood by all the citizens, they are replaced by cant, dogma, codes, regulations, and laws. And these systems of human interaction, feelings, belief, and legislation continuously evolve, reacting to the forces crystallizing out of the urban social magma.

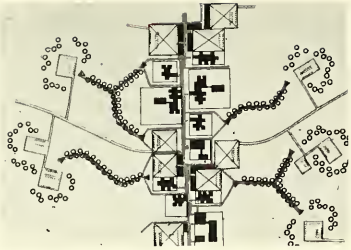
These forces result partly from the physical properties of life in the city, which are, in

turn, determined by systems which manifest man's impulsion to live together in some kind of physical urban harmony. These are the ways, the pipes, the wires and tubes, the viscera of the city, the urban underground which has so radically transformed men's lives, raising them above nature, freeing them from natural constraints, liberating them. Men in cities thus become free not only from the tribal social order but also from the rural natural order. And they find themselves obliged in their freedom, and perhaps by their freedom, to invent new and sometimes strange constraints such as those which are developed by a bureaucratic, administrative apparatus.

The marvelous liberty which is gained through control over the physical environment, thanks to technical advances, is too often frittered away or entirely wasted in footless, inconsequential administrative incompetencies, or else is negated by such vicious unnatural practices as the preparation for, and the waging of war.

It is dangerously commonplace to say that we thrive on adversity. It is sometimes true we tend to over-react in an adverse situation and in so doing we may prove once more our adaptability by bringing a good result out of a bad set of circumstances. But we do not need to be so perverse as to create conditions of adversity. The flowers that bloom on the dung heap are, after all, not more beautiful than the flowers of the fields and gardens. They are only a welcome relief. On the other hand, disease proliferates in dung. There is no

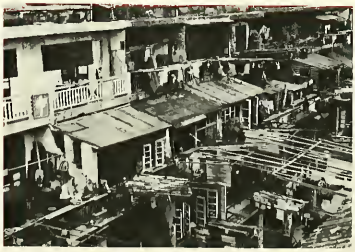
excuse for creating a hostile climate, nor should we tolerate any in which our humanity is threatened. Our technologies can protect us from a naturally hostile physical environment. It is a mis-use of technology for it to be allowed to render the environment still more hostile, until, as each solution engenders yet more problems, running harder and harder to keep from falling flat, we go over the ultimate cliff. What I am trying to say is that, although the uses of adversity may be sweet, we should have the good sense to stay in control,



having invented the machines and methods, to remain the masters of these servants.

Urbanism, urban design, which is architecture at the scale of the city, is principally concerned with organization, and therefore with the allocation, distribution and use of materials and energies. The techniques of building are essentially ways of associating materials and energies, of organizing wealth into present and future patterns of use. In the present we determine the actual choice of

materials and their use in buildings. The general organization of buildings, and their relationships to the distribution and servicing systems from which they draw sustenance, dictate future patterns of use of energies. This means that decisions made by architects, planners, and urbanists have global import today and tomorrow, a state of affairs which had been lost from view in the immediate past, although I believe that it was fully understood in antiquity. These conditions under which we now work, knowing the global connotations of



our every decision, implicate us directly and expressly in a revolutionary, or pre-revolutionary situation. We are part of the forces which act on the resources of the world in an immediate way. Our decisions, or our counsels, affect the use to which those resources are put.

U is also urgency, Everyone is concerned with urbanism. It is everybody's business. We all suffer from decisions not made, or made on a basis of inadequate information, or insincere commitment. Yet those decisions determine the physical and psychological milieu, the environment in which we live and in which we hope our society, or societies, will thrive. We have discovered, after decades and centuries of fumbling, that a little bit of government ('the least possible') is far too much to allow a free play of free market process, even if that theory could apply in our crowded world, and that we probably need much more than we think. 'The least possible' may very well look like the spectre of socialism which was used to

terrify Grandpa, but we will probably find it quite acceptable, since we are losing the voracious appetite which Grandpa had for "the things of this world" and irrational concentrations of wealth. As our numbers increase around the globe, presumably toward some optimum mass, we cannot continue to allow critical decisions to be arrived at, or deferred, by some arcane process of which even the best-informed administrators seem to be ignorant. We run great risks, I believe, in continuing to allow power to float free of responsibility. (The CIA, the use of seniority in House and Senate Committees, the States' authority over cities, are all manifestations of this particularly unsavory phenomenon, which seems to be on the increase.)

We live in constant degrading and dehumanizing fear of such superdangers as fission and fusion bombs, CBW, the population explosion, irreversible ecological disasters, total alienation of entire classes, races, sexes, and generations. In the face of such dangers man organizes, even

subconsciously, in self-defense. The danger now is real, and it is visible. We can feel it, we can even see it. Our great scientists, many of them winners of the dynamite prize, are constantly cautioning us. The history of the twentieth century would appear to be one of unrelieved disaster, the poor dying of inanition while the rich choke on their own wealth, fouling the earth and the sea and the air with the putrid by-products of an illusory affluence.

What Can U Do? As I indicated before, urbanism is a part of the process that determines the use of resources. It may sometimes be only a minute part, but all parts are significant. You may feel that our position as architects and urbanists, handmaidens and footmen to the very forces which are said to be the most pernicious — the state, the institutions and the corporations — leaves us little or no power to influence the decisions that create inexorably an increasingly hostile world. No matter how little our power, we must use it and our

skills, to demonstrate alternatives to the present suicidal course of policy revealed in the positive and negative actions of government and business.

In London, on April 16, 85 of the 110 seats on the G.L.C. were contested by a consumer group, organized by transportation, planning, and urban specialists. The group called itself "Homes Before Roads", and campaigned on a platform of public transportation spending in lieu of further motorway construction. What is significant is not the number of seats they might have won (they won none) but the fact that this was the first time such a consumer-oriented party had been organized in London.

In San Francisco the Embarcadero Freeway was stopped by citizens' manifestations; in New York the Lower Manhattan Expressway was halted, ostensibly by a vocal minority. There are many other examples of "action urbanism" of this nature, but the London one is perhaps the most satisfactory since it predicates acceptance of

responsibility and positive action — not merely stopping something but advancing intelligent proposals for changes to harmonize administrative goals and priorities with the citizens' needs and aspirations. This citizen and professional participation in programming is increasingly being practiced in cities and, as long as it does not become obscure in a fog of advocacy of good but extraneous causes, it gives great hope for the future of community control and a direct relationship between the urbanist or architect and his ultimate client.

Advocacy has often been denounced as a hoax, and rightly so, when it pretended to render services which it could not provide, such as obtaining funds, or when it seemed only to defuse the righteous indignation of the community without performing any real services. I believe that it is essential that the community have a hand in choosing its advocates from the professions, and that clearly defined programs of action be developed with those advocates, and then, finally, that the entire notion of advocacy be removed by establishing typical,

normal, professional relationships with no sentiment of charity involved. Since this is usually the case (there is no charity; the architects are looking out for their clients) it should be possible, from there, to lead an assault upon the fastnesses of bureaucracy where the repressive rules are invented, and, finally to restore decision-making to an intelligible process.

At another scale of involvement, U can do much to redress the system of economic disparity and social injustice in the world, first of all simply by not seeking to perpetuate and even to extend it. We should not give up the struggle to improve the balance between numbers and wealth, to insist that the vast resources of our complex technologies be applied to making a better life for every person on this earth, and to apply ourselves to demonstrating how this can be done. And that means discovering how to do it.

To go back to a previous point: urbanism is

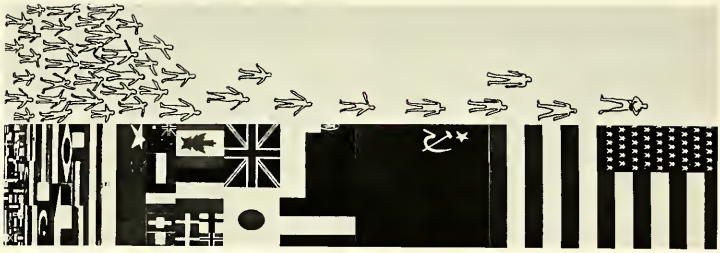
primarily an organizing process, as is architecture. The wealth of nations, the world's wealth, can be used for either constructive or destructive purposes. Urbanism, a constructive use of wealth, can have destructive connotations if it uses the world's resources unwisely, if it wastes them. In addition to the obvious dangers of waste (pollution, for example) there is the danger of imbalance in the distribution systems, with congestion at some points and penury at others. At the present time some 3/4 of the world product

(which might be called the Gross International Product, or GIP) is being consumed by about 1/4 of the population, most of it in the Northern Hemisphere. This clearly reveals an irrational concentration of wealth, on the edge of a sea of poverty. The scientific prediction people, working from observable trends, expect this disparity to increase, with North America consuming about 80% of the GIP and representing 6% of the population in, for example, 1984. It seems to me that this frenetic consumption of the world's wealth could very well create a

revolutionary situation, in which we would be cast in the role of the oppressors although this is hardly the idea we have of ourselves, if we take our great political documents as evidence. It will not be "revolution for the hell of it", in America, but, for the rest of the world, revolution for survival. Since we have clearly demonstrated that we do not require all this wealth — look how much of it we squander in the waging of war and how much we dissipate in various forms of pollution — for our own needs, and since we seem actually

to suffer from our so-called affluence with physiological distress and pyschological vying for top honors in the hostile environment which this affluence has created, and since, finally, it turns us against one another, and against our brothers and they against us, hadn't we better reconsider this kind of progress which strangely resembles that of the lemming?

Well, we are reconsidering, in the Northern Hemisphere. The birth rate is receding in Japan, for instance. Young people all through



the 'western' or developed nations are questioning the precepts of greed, and growth for its own sake. Ecology is a campaign issue. Even John Volpe, a king of the road if ever there was one when he was governor of Mass., is talking about mass transit, as an alternative to further urban highway building! I may be clutching at straws, and whistling in the dark, but I feel that the self defense mechanism of which I spoke earlier is beginning to operate, and perhaps we may look forward to a saner future.

For Urbanists and architects a saner future means that we can at last rid ourselves of all those nutty ideas about throw-away buildings, built-in obsolescence, high energy consuming schemes, and walk-around cities on the one hand — but it also means that we must reconsider extreme low-density development, with its enormous waste potential and over-extended supply lines, on the other. We come at last to the useful end of the 'waste produces wealth' period, having discovered that the wealth

produced by waste is ill-gotten, a two-edged sword, a poisoned gift.

Architects and urbanists will make their plans and develop them in light of economic, rather than merely financial considerations, for instance.

Decisions will be made on the basis of reason, perhaps, and not merely in the light of political opportunism. Reason will dictate continuous renewal of the environment at every scale, not massive blight followed by massive reconstruction.

Shadrach Woods
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